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Deposited in DRO:

11 March 2020

Version of attached file:

Accepted Version

Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

Citation for published item:

Osborne, Toby (2019) 'Whither diplomatic history? an early modern historian's perspective.', *Diplomatica*, 1 (1). pp. 40-45.

Further information on publisher's website:

<https://doi.org/10.1163/25891774-00101007>

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Whither diplomatic history? An early-modern historian's perspective

Without wishing to appear indulgent, I will begin this short essay by recalling some advice given to me in the 1990s when I was at the start of my academic career, in the market for a job. As I was completing my doctorate on an early seventeenth century diplomat and his social, cultural and political worlds, I was told that I should not sell myself as a diplomatic historian. Diplomatic history was definitely not in fashion at the time: it was typically seen as boring and elitist; it was the narrative history of high politics. Instead, I packaged my work as social history, claiming it was 'new diplomatic history', and restating that theme in the book that followed my doctorate. At that time, I wished to stress, albeit within a broadly narrative framework, the networks of friendships and layers of political, familial and cultural interests that shaped an individual diplomat's public career, and of how, from my actor-driven account, his personality and 'creativity' affected his state's foreign policies.¹

Of course, since the beginning of the twenty-first century, and certainly in the last decade, the study of early modern diplomacy has blossomed once again, though ironically, it perhaps remains unfashionable to claim to work on 'diplomatic history', as if that is still rather embarrassing – indeed, it seems to me that at least some of the impetus to realign (or repackage) the study of early modern diplomatic history had been driven by a sense of academic defensiveness. Scholars in the field are almost all now engaged in 'new diplomatic history', the language of which, at least in the Anglophone world of early modern scholarship, had been established certainly by the

¹ Toby Osborne, *Dynasty and Diplomacy in the Court of Savoy. Political Culture and the Thirty Years' War* (Cambridge, 2002). For an actor-centred approach to early modern diplomacy see also Hillard Von Thiessen, and Christian Windler (eds.) (2010) *Akteure der Außenbeziehungen. Netzwerke und Interkulturalität im historischen Wandel*. (Cologne, Weimar, Vienna, 2010).

early 2000s.² If pushed, I would state simply that I work on diplomatic practice, to side-step the negative connotations of ‘old’ diplomatic history entirely, though also because there are – perhaps inevitably – some dangers inherent in new diplomatic history too, as seen, for example, below in the under-playing of ‘formal’ diplomacy. What, therefore, might the future hold for the study of diplomacy, at least of diplomacy from the perspective of the early modern world? With the creation of this journal and the opportunities it presents, this question is all the more apposite.

We might certainly ask whether ‘new diplomatic history’ in any case can really be described as ‘new’ anymore, given how pervasive and commonplace it has become. While it is methodologically heterogeneous by nature, and perhaps difficult actually to define with precision, it nevertheless has some broad, and generally settled, characteristics, which I will not rehearse in detail here – it is certainly recognisable in form.³ There is an inherent suspicion of narrative and high politics; practice in all its guises - from the protocols of diplomatic immunities to diplomatic ceremonial, to gift exchanges and cultural patronage and brokering - seemingly matters considerably more than what actually ‘happened’. Core archival material – diplomatic correspondence – is treated not solely as a source of factual information, which is

² For example, Daniela Frigo (ed.), *Politics and Diplomacy in Early Modern Italy. The Structure of Diplomatic Practice, 1450-1800* (Cambridge, 2000), especially the introduction.

³ For some valuable overviews of early modern new diplomatic history and its thematic emphases and methodologies, in chronological order of publication, see John Watkins, ‘Towards a New Diplomatic History of Medieval and Early Modern Europe’, *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 38 (2008), 1-14; Daniel Riches, *Protestant Cosmopolitanism and Diplomatic Culture: Brandenburg-Swedish Relations in the Seventeenth Century* (Leiden, 2013), Introduction; M. Ebberts and L. Sicking, ‘Nieuwe diplomatieke geschiedenis van de premoderne tijd. Een inleiding’, *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis*, 127 (2014), 541-552; Tracey Sowerby, ‘Early Modern Diplomatic History’, *History Compass*, 14 (2016), 441-456.

arguably of only secondary interest as narrative is relegated, but perhaps more for what it tells us about the mental and material worlds of diplomats and their social and cultural *milieux*. Correspondingly, letters and texts on diplomacy are read for their subtexts as near-literary constructions, as diplomats and diplomatic theorists too become fiction makers; we have now to read between the lines when we examine their writings.⁴ At the same time, Europe is no longer seen as necessarily the only realm of diplomatic practice, or as uniquely important, unpicking an historiographical debate that traditionally sought to locate the origins of modern permanent diplomacy and the resident ambassador, as an archetypal figure, in late-fifteenth century Italy. As historians decentre their accounts of early modern diplomatic practice, transnational history and *histoire croisée* are eroding the boundaries between Europe and the wider world, not least as a kaleidoscopic range of diplomatic actors are seen to have slipped between different, but interconnected, cultural, religious and ethnic communities, thereby finding ways of translating diplomacy across those communities.⁵ Indeed, 'diplomacy' as a formal practice - the preserve of internationally accepted sovereign powers and (in this period at least) carried out exclusively by men - is qualified; unofficial, or informal, or sub-state diplomacy is taken as being of at least equal importance, conducted by individuals (again, largely though not exclusively men), working at the margins of official practice, or indeed by non-sovereign collective

⁴ The outstanding work in this regard is Timothy Hampton's *Fictions of Embassy: Literature and Diplomacy in Early Modern Europe* (Ithaca and London, 2009).

⁵ Among the various works, in English, looking at cross-cultural diplomacy see, notably, John-Paul Ghobrial, *The whispers of cities. Information Flows in Istanbul, London and Paris in the Age of William Trumbull* (Oxford, 2013). Two recent special editions of the *Journal of Early Modern History* have also focused on these themes: Maartje van Gelder and Tijana Krstić (eds.), 'Cross-Confessional Diplomacy and Diplomatic Intermediaries in the Early Modern Mediterranean', 19 (2015); Toby Osborne and Joan-Pau Rubiés (eds.), 'Diplomacy and Cultural Translation in the Early Modern World', 20: 3 (2016).

interest groups, such as mercantile companies or religious orders.⁶ This last point seems especially important. In part it reflects an aversion that various early modern historians have (I would count myself amongst them) of locating the ‘rise’ of the modern state, as a rational political unit, in the sixteenth and, more particularly the seventeenth century, and of diplomacy as a distinctive manifestation of this statist teleology.

My intention here is not unconstructively to question the validity of these immensely fruitful approaches. They have indeed energised the study of diplomacy. Rather, what I want to do is to offer some qualifying thoughts, and to suggest some potential future directions of diplomatic history from my perspective as an historian of the early modern period. We can do this by reflecting a little more closely on the stress given to unofficial/informal/sub-state diplomacy, as one example. Ostensibly, it seems entirely reasonable to question the view that diplomacy was the monopoly of the sovereign state. The semantics, too, of how we characterise this diplomacy exposes further historiographical challenges, especially in a context where new diplomatic history seeks to move beyond sovereign diplomacy. If, for example, we speak of ‘unofficial’ diplomacy, was this therefore diplomacy necessarily without the consent of the sovereign or state, and was it of lesser importance as a consequence? The same might be said of ‘informal’ diplomacy as a designation, which some scholars interested in stressing the importance of such less ‘conventional’ practice, might fear inversely privileges ‘formal’ diplomacy. On the other hand, to talk of ‘sub-state’ diplomats might underplay the fact that in some instances it was in fact desirable for sovereign powers to employ individuals who could work outside the constraints of their official practices,

⁶ On the diplomatic roles played by women over a *longue durée* see Corina Bastian, Eva Kathrin Dade, Hillard von Thiessen and Christian Windler (eds.), *Das Geschlecht der Diplomatie. Geschlechterrollen in den Außenbeziehungen vom Spätmittelalter bis zum 20. Jahrhundert* (Vienna, Cologne, Weimar, 2013). On the roles played by mercantile companies as non-state organisations see, for instance, Arthur Weststeijn, ‘The VOC as a Company-State. Debating Seventeenth-Century Dutch Colonial Expansion’, *Itinerario*, 38, 1 (2014), 13-34.

while indeed some diplomatic actors, such as merchant companies were not themselves of full sovereign status.

Lurking behind these semantic questions is a broader historiographical point of emphasis. Given the multitude of different actors that interest early modern historians - from translators and merchants, to artists and members of religious orders - it seems that almost anyone might be called a 'diplomat'. However, there is also a danger that in doing so, 'diplomacy' becomes so varied and multifarious that it begins to lose definable meaning. How can we measure what 'diplomacy' actually was? Whatever stress we place on unofficial, informal, or sub-state diplomacy, or however much we want to downplay the 'rise of the modern state', of which 'diplomacy' was a concomitant practice, we should nevertheless not lose sight of the fact that from the sixteenth century onwards, accredited ambassadors were categorically distinct – official diplomacy mattered. Only accredited diplomats, who travelled with the markers of legitimacy (such as passports, letters of credentials), for example, could be assured of increasingly defined immunities; and increasingly, the complex and costly logistics of diplomacy required the resources of sovereigns and states. Indeed, interest in 'practice' (such as ceremonial) that constitutes a major strand of new diplomatic history, is itself predicated on official diplomacy. The point is that a balance is needed.

But, more positively, what of the potential futures of early modern diplomatic history? There are certainly specific issues and themes that probably deserve more attention. To take one example, historians of diplomatic practice have long been interested in the cultural impacts diplomats had in the field, as commissioners, consumers, and buyers of works of art and finished goods.⁷ On the other hand, there has been, so it seems, relatively little work on the effects pre-modern diplomats and diplomacy had on host cities, including, for instance, their economic impacts. While permanent 'embassies' as a widespread phenomenon were still some time away, the fact that diplomats spent increasingly long periods in their missions, with functioning household and often family members too, necessitated logistics such as housing and food, and also more ceremonial resources such as coaches and horses.

⁷ For example, Helen Jacobsen, *Luxury and Power: The Material World of the Stuart Diplomat, 1660-1714* (Oxford, 2012).

There are also broader themes open for early modern historians. One of the beneficial outcomes of new diplomatic history, from an historian's perspective, has been the richness of interdisciplinary and multi-disciplinary approaches to the field, drawing, for example, from anthropology and literary studies, and, through the growing interest in performative approaches and symbolic communication, especially from German historians, from linguistic philosophy and gender studies.⁸ Perhaps curiously, though, despite this willingness to borrow from different disciplines, 'orthodox' historians have tended to remain inherently suspicious of International Relations and its methodological debates. Hitherto, there has been relatively little interaction between the fields. This is possibly all the more surprising because there are some evident parallels between new diplomatic history, in its early modern context, and some more recent IR themes. Notably, the push to expand the boundaries of diplomacy beyond the formal, to encompass sub-state actors, as outlined above, has been of immense importance, despite my qualification that we do not lose sight entirely of the primacy of official practice. It has reminded us, in the first place, that sovereignty did not simply develop on a clear, linear track, and that early modern sovereign power was not always rational, and in various cases remained somewhat 'messy'. In itself this resonates with the recent interest in 'paradiplomacy', while the interest of historians to reconstruct the social and cultural worlds of diplomats bears comparison with constructivist accounts of International Relations and the stress on the social constructions underpinning diplomacy.⁹ In some respects, it seems to me, as an historian, that the 'state' in some contemporary IR research, has become messier too.

⁸ The value of 'symbolic communication' as applied to diplomatic practice, and indeed to sub-state diplomacy, can be seen notably in André Krischer's *Reichsstädte in der Fürstengesellschaft. Zum politischen Zeichengebrauch in der Frühen Neuzeit* (Darmstadt, 2006).

⁹ For instance, Noe Cornago, '(Para)diplomatic cultures: old and new', in *Diplomatic Cultures and International Politics. Translations, Spaces and Alternatives*, eds. Jason Dittmer and Fiona McConnell (Abingdon, 2016), 175-94.

With these shared interests, there are perhaps opportunities for cross-fertilisation and dialogue among historians and IR specialists.

What is more, given the parallels between the early modern and contemporary diplomatic worlds, perhaps more ambitiously, historians of early modern diplomacy might be more vocal in engaging with diplomatic stakeholders and practitioners too. The current emphasis, in the British academic system, notably, on connecting academic research with applied outcomes offers potential opportunities for scholars interested in pre-modern diplomacy to bring their research questions to bear on current issues of practice. I have been fortunate to have organised, with the support of the Arts and Humanities Research Council (the principal British research council for the humanities) a series of workshops based around the title of 'Translating Cultures: Diplomacy between the Early-Modern and Modern Worlds' [AH/K005049/1]. One of those workshops, in partnership with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, brought scholars of the early modern period together with practising diplomatic personnel to consider some of the challenges of cross-cultural diplomacy in its historical context. Similarly, in 2016 I was equally fortunate to have co-organised, with Simon Rofe of SOAS, a conference dedicated to London embassies and the new US Embassy at Nine Elms, in which the backstory of London diplomacy, ranging back to the seventeenth century, was examined.

There are surely more opportunities for these kinds of constructive engagements. Old questions are there to be re-examined, and new ones posed. This journal, as a forum for these questions, will no doubt further enhance the scholarly discipline(s), and, for this, it is most welcome.